



Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind

By Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy L. Chick and Aeron Haynie, eds.; Stylus, 2009.

Reviewed by Susan Yager, Iowa State University

This collection of essays builds on Lee Shulman’s groundbreaking study of how students in law, medicine, and other professions are initiated into their fields. What Shulman calls *signature pedagogies* are “types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated” and that help form “habits” of the heart, mind and hand (“Signature pedagogies in the professions,” *Daedalus* 134.3 [Summer 2005] 52[8]).

Regan Gurung and his colleagues have taken up Shulman’s suggestion that signature pedagogies, as practiced in professional education, can profitably inspire educators in the liberal arts and sciences. The contributors, nearly all of whom are faculty in the University of Wisconsin system, extend the idea of signature pedagogies to undergraduate education in their respective disciplines. Each chapter seeks to describe teaching approaches that nurture the thoughts, actions and values of beginners in a specific field, and summarizes or recommends further work in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) related to signature pedagogies.

These chapters offer some fascinating perspectives on the nature and identity of disciplines within the humanities and fine arts, the social sciences, and numerous STEM fields. A few chapters offer little more than a literature review and a list of current classroom practices; the best ones, however, relate the story of a specific field and the elements that make it distinctive. The chapter on history, for example, which leads the collection, describes the trend toward “doing history” in the undergraduate classroom (p. 23), building on Lendol Calder’s discussion of “uncoverage.” This term, adapted from Wiggins and McTighe’s *Understanding by Design*, describes a key pedagogical strategy to help students think about the past in context rather than as a series of indisputable facts. The chapter on music, co-authored by specialists in music theory and music performance, similarly tells a story of these once-disparate disciplines and how their traditions have been brought together in contemporary departments of music.

Other very successful chapters include those on psychology, agriculture, and mathematics. Each points to the specific nature of its discipline and the elements – the tradition of judging produce and livestock in agriculture, for example – that make its pedagogies unique. Less successful chapters generally treat fields that do not have, or have not yet reached the stage of articulating, actual or potential signature pedagogies. For example, a struggling discipline like English studies (my own field) cannot easily be described in terms of a uniting pedagogy. Similarly, a field like geography, which overlaps such disciplines as sociology, geology, history and economics, may be difficult to define in terms of field-specific teaching.

For the most part, however, this volume fulfills its editors’ desire to offer faculty a “metadisciplinary awareness” and to help “facilitate the cross-pollinating conversations essential to the liberal arts and sciences” (12). Teachers in many disciplines will reap insights from *Exploring Signature Pedagogies*, as will faculty developers and anyone interested in SoTL and the next steps in that arena. Faculty who are curious about what disciplines have in common can readily gather how fields are connected and what common practices – even common metaphors – are employed across departments and col-

-leges. The book will also be valuable for any faculty who are being encouraged to consider SoTL in their own research and who may be skeptical of its disciplinary value.

The editors acknowledge that this volume raises as many questions as it answers. For example, the collection leaves unresolved whether signature pedagogies are distinct practices that define their disciplines or simply successful classroom activities. The chapter on physics equates signature pedagogies and innovative teaching, identifying signature pedagogies with new approaches as opposed to “traditional” ones (p. 284). Other questions also remain: What is the role of signature pedagogies in general education as opposed to the major? How do we define or divide the disciplines? What defines expert thinking in *interdisciplinary* fields? And how can signature pedagogies help develop deep content knowledge, which Shulman insists is as necessary as disciplinary thinking?

Understanding Signature Pedagogies has both the advantages and the flaws of being produced quickly. While it is wonderful to have such up-to-date literature reviews on pedagogy in various fields, the book in some places reveals hasty editing. For example, chunks of text are repeated in the introductory chapter and in the chapter on the arts. Despite such problems, faculty and classroom researchers will welcome this volume. It invites, and certainly will promote, further work on signature pedagogies.